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After objectivity: what moral norms should govern news reporting?

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Please note that this paper goes into some detail on “partial-birth” abortion

Introduction

As many of you are aware, I’m sure, the title of my remarks today is a conscious echo of “After Virtue,” the remarkable book by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published exactly a quarter century ago this year. I have chosen to evoke MacIntyre for two reasons. First, because identifying with the work of an infinitely wiser man is an easy way to imply intellectual gravitas for one’s own. Second, because the state of moral discourse described by MacIntyre—a world in which there are no shared first principles, only shards of concepts left over from historically quite different contexts of moral reasoning—is an apt description of journalistic discourse. Indeed, the current vogue in American journalism for shouting matches between talk-show pundits is premised on the assumption that participants will proceed from vastly different moral and political first principles. The public, it is assumed, loves the din created when ignorant armies clash by night. As it happens, I had the privilege of interviewing MacIntyre at considerable length on one occasion.

Most of what I will be talking about today concerns a single adjective, “partial-birth,” as in the phrase, “partial-birth abortion.” My interest in this adjective was piqued some years ago when I noticed that it never appeared in the headline whenever The New York Times published a story about this particular medical procedure, prompting me to investigate the reasons for this programmatic exclusion.

But first, by way of further justifying my title, permit me a few words of a more general kind.

“After Objectivity,” refers most directly to the widespread feeling in the United States that American journalism once strove for objectivity in reporting the news but no longer does so. That is not exactly my experience. Long before academics discovered “post modernism” journalists understood how limited each of us is, and how difficult it can be to find out, on deadline, wherein the truth lies. We scramble for the right perspective. I have seen bias in news reports and I have worked with biased editors on occasion. But the bias was in almost every case a function of ignorance—sometimes willful, usually not. As Tom Brokaw said recently when he signed off after decades as the anchor of NBC’s Nightly News, “The one thing that made me proud is when we got it right.”

In any case, I rarely hear working journalists talk about objectivity as such. A good editor, when going over copy, will ask the reporter specific questions like, “Where did you get this?” “Who are your sources?” “Where is the evidence for this assertion?” In other words, they ask the kinds of questions that every professional journalist should always ask himself: “What do I know and how do I know it?” This personal interrogation, it seems to me is fundamental to your conference theme: “Professional Integrity.”

This afternoon, I want to explore this theme by focusing on single issue, “partial-birth” abortion, as it has been covered by a single newspaper, The New York Times. My interest is in the ethics of journalistic practices, not in the morality of abortion. The issue is timely for two reasons. This fall, the United States Supreme Court, will take up a case involving “partial birth” abortion, and the Court’s decision either way will surely figure in the next Presidential election. I have chosen the Times primarily because it is our best and most influential newspaper—the one that foreign journalists always read and broadcast media most often cite. It is also our “newspaper of record,” and its usages and linguistic formulations are the ones most likely to be copied by other media outlets.

My remarks are drawn from a study I did for the University of Notre Dame’s Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy, and are based on a computer analysis of all articles on “partial birth” abortion published by the Times since the issue surfaced in 1995. My hope is that this admittedly detailed case

study will illuminate the role played in journalism by what we journalists refer to as “the newsroom culture.”

Overview: The Problem of Labels

Journalists make ethical decisions all the time. Most of these decisions are also and at the same time questions of craft: that is, they are intimately involved with the choice of words and phrases used in the stories written by reporters and in the editing done by editors. Even the writing of headlines, as I hope to show, can reflect value judgments. The craft of journalism demands that language be clear and accurate. Journalistic ethics demands that language be fair. In practice, these twin demands are not always respected or easily joined.

Because of its moral seriousness, its power to evoke strong emotions, its social consequences and its political ramifications, the issue of abortion, has severely tested news organizations in their efforts to be clear, accurate and fair. One obvious problem is the question of labels. One party in the public debate over abortion calls itself “pro-choice,” thereby making a “woman’s right to choose,” as it is usually put, the paramount issue. The other side calls itself “pro-life,” because it believes the central issue is the fetus’ “right to life.” Like trial lawyers and public relations experts, advocates on both sides of the abortion divide recognize that those who frame the issue control the debate. “The language is everything,” Douglas Gould, former vice president for communications at Planned Parenthood of America told the Los Angeles Times, in 1990.

Reporters, too, frame issues, and on abortion it is difficult to imagine a reporter who is personally not on one side or the other. In 1985, a Los Angeles Times poll of journalists working on newspapers of all sizes, found that 82 per cent of them favor abortion rights. But reporters work within the context of their own news organizations, and beyond that within the larger world of the media in general. After years of internal newsroom discussions, those responsible for the nation’s major newspapers gradually settled on “abortion rights” advocates and “anti-abortion” advocates as accurate labels that do not commit news organizations themselves to one viewpoint or the other. Once these terms have been established, “pro-choice” and “pro-life” are acceptable adjectives for advocates and their organizations.

But this linguistic settlement by no means exhausts the language choices that plague journalists who write about abortion. The clearest example is the media’s routine use of the medically accurate term “fetus” when referring to an unborn baby in the post-embryonic state. The assumption, presumably, is that the term “fetus” is somehow neutral because “scientific” while the term “baby”—which a human fetus undoubtedly is—implies a mutual attachment which, for the sake of journalistic neutrality, must be ignored. But in common conversation, one never hears one woman ask another, “How’s your fetus?” Taken together, “mother” and “baby” are terms of endearment that imply a mutual relationship. Perhaps this is why abortion-rights advocates—or, alternatively, “reproductive rights” advocates—prefer the impersonal and non-relational language of “woman” and “fetus.” To the extent that news organizations exclusively use the word “fetus,” they inherently support the “pro choice” position.

Newsroom Culture

There is no question that the New York Times, like the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and other big-city newspapers, supports abortion rights. This is true not only of the editorial board, which reflects the official position of the newspaper and its owners, but also of the institutionally-bred columnists it employs to write for its op-ed page. On the subject of abortion, they are all message.

Nor is there any question that the Times has been singularly parsimonious in the amount of space it has given to positions other than its own pro-choice stance: as a reader of the Times for 40 years, I cannot recall more than a half-dozen instances in which the newspaper published op-ed pieces by outsiders arguing against the newspaper’s strong and unwavering support for unrestricted abortion rights. Conversely, in any given week where abortion is in the news, it is not at all unusually to see the Times print three or four editorials and columns defending abortion rights. The only question of interest here is whether this institutional commitment to the pro-choice position also colors the way it reports the news.

It is the job of the Times' Public Editor to examine evidence of bias in the newspaper's reporting, and on December 26, 2004 he addressed this concern, albeit obliquely, as it relates to the issue of abortion. In his "Public Editor" column David Okrent cited examples of what, in his judgment, the newspaper does right. His prime example was a December 2 piece by reporter Robin Toner headlined, CHANGING SENATE LOOKS MUCH BETTER TO ABORTION FOES. Okrent praised the article for being a "straightforward" and "illuminating" report that "addressed an extremely contentious issue without betraying the writer's own views."

This struck me as faint praise at best, implying as it did that reporters for the Times are not always so self-effacing. But journalism is a communal enterprise, and no story appearing in the Times, or in any other newspaper (or magazine), is entirely the work of a single individual. What finally appears in print is edited and must conform to the newspaper's standards, including those of accuracy and fairness. But those who edit a newspaper, like those who run a university, operate within a community that has its own institutional culture. Okrent has addressed this communal aspect of the Times as well.

In a much-discussed previous column, Okrent asked rhetorically, "Is the New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?" His straightforward answer was: "Of course it is." As evidence he cited not only the editorial page but also the Times' reporting. Significantly, the issues he chose were not political or economic but social--abortion, gay marriage and the like. Citing the issue of same-sex marriage, Okrent found much in the way of "implicit advocacy," not only in what Times reported but what it did not. He then went on to observe that "if you are among the groups The Times treats as strange objects to be examined on a laboratory slide (devout Catholics, gun owners, Orthodox Jews, Texans); if your value system wouldn't wear well on a composite New York Times journalist, then a walk through this paper can make you feel you're traveling in a strange and forbidding world." Such frankness is rare among Public Editors.

What Okrent is talking about here is what journalists typically refer to as the "newsroom culture." By that I mean an implicit set of shared workplace assumptions about which values and attitudes on public issues are acceptable and which are not. Newsroom culture is what makes certain kinds of people seem odd to the paper's editors and, all too often, even to the beat reporters whose job is to cover these aliens on the American landscape. Clues to the newsroom culture show up not only in how these outsiders and their attitudes are covered, but also in the headlines assigned to stories about them, the quotes used from interviews with them, and the placement of stories which indicates an editorial judgment of importance—all the routine news decisions that collectively manifest the personality of the paper and distinguish it from its competitors. Failure to provide perspectives other than that of the newsroom culture, Okrent argued, occurs *not* by "management fiat, but because getting outside one's own value system takes a great deal of self-questioning."

This statement is true but not complete or entirely accurate. Like other major newspapers, the New York Times not only publishes a style book on proper usage but also has an assistant managing editor, until last June, Alan M. Siegal, whose responsibility is to decide questions of usage or style. In a series of interviews by email, his preferred medium for answering questions from outside journalists, Mr. Siegal told me: "We try very hard to arrive at neutral terminology for disputed issues. Ordinarily on matters of language and style, I make the style decisions, though sometimes I consult the top editors of the paper if the issue is so controversial that it may appear to position the paper." Siegal said that it was through this process that the Times settled on "abortion-rights" and "anti-abortion" as its standard terms for identifying the contending parties in the abortion debate.

"Partial-Birth": A Special Case

But the term "partial-birth" presents a special set of difficulties, especially for a news organization like the Times that is committed to unrestricted abortion rights. The first problem is *not* that "partial birth" is an inaccurate definition of the procedure. The term is listed and defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary, which is used by the websites of the National Institutes of Health and Harvard Medical School among other medical institutions and organizations. Rather, the problem is that the term was favored by politicians who initiated the first Congressional effort to ban the procedure, and it was quickly adopted by anti-abortion organizations. In this procedure, the physician typically pulls the fetus/baby legs-first outside the mother's body and then, using a scissors, reaches inside the birth canal to break the skull, causing it to collapse. The brains are then sucked out and the fetus/baby removed

entirely from the mother. “Partial birth” as a label emphasizes the fact that delivery of a fetus/baby takes place, but only up to a point, and solely for the purpose of destroying it.

Once the details of this abortion procedure were made public, opposition to it was no longer limited to groups and politicians who oppose *all* abortions. Various polls show that most Americans opposed the “partial birth” procedure by margins of up to two to one. In 1997, the House of Delegates of the American Medical Association endorsed a proposed Congressional ban on the procedure, despite clear reservations about any law that would criminalize physicians who do them. Many physicians, including those who do abortions, found this procedure morally unacceptable. So did many politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, who are in principle pro-choice. The reason was obvious: as the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat, put it, this procedure “is infanticide.” In short, “partial birth” abortion was no longer just a partisan issue created by anti-abortion advocates but a moral issue that transcends political categories

The second problem is that, unlike the word, “fetus,” there was in 1995 no alternative “scientific” term for this procedure that had been established and agreed upon by the medical profession. The reasons were simple: the procedure was not widely taught in medical schools, had never been subject to peer review and therefore most physicians, including those who do abortions, were unaware of it. A search of the literature found that one physician, Dr. James McMahon, who pioneered this type of abortion, labeled it “intact dilation and evacuation.” Another physician, Dr. Martin Haskell, called it “dilation and extraction,” and under a third coinage it was called “intrauterine cranial decompression.” But these were coinages by individual abortionists, and had no standing within the medical profession. As the House Judiciary Committee reported in 1995, “Just as the term partial birth abortion is not found in medical literature, these terms are not found in medical literature because these horrific procedures are not generally accepted by the medical community...”

Seeing the need for a term that would medicalize the procedure, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which supports abortion rights and represents many physicians who perform abortions, eventually adopted on the term “intact dilation and extraction.” Even so, this term has never caught on with news organizations, including The New York Times, as a useful journalistic alternative to “partial-birth” abortion. For one thing, it was cumbersome for headline writers; for another, it did not really tell the reader what the fuss is all about.

The difference between “intact dilation and extraction” and “partial-birth abortion” is instructive. The former describes what the doctor does to the mother: dilate the cervix and extract the contents of her birth canal. “Partial birth” describes what happens to the fetus/baby: it is partially delivered alive, at which point the physician can either proceed to a full birth or destroy the fetus/child—the latter being, of course, the purpose of all abortions. Significantly, neither term comes close to describing the violence done to the fetus/baby.

Politics and the Language of Evasion

Given these problems, what kind of language should a news organization use in reporting this story? Those of you who have copies of this talk will notice that throughout I have put “partial-birth” inside quotation marks. The quotation marks carry the meaning of “so-called” and signal to the reader that while this is the term by which the abortion procedure in question is commonly understood, it is not in any sense official within the medical community. The marks also signal to the reader that the term is contested, as are “pro-choice,” “pro-life” and “reproductive rights.” My examination of news articles on this subject dating back to 1995, when this form of abortion first generated public debate and therefore attracted media attention, shows that “partial birth” is frequently the term of choice for headlines in the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune. But not The New York Times.

Why? This question goes to the heart of my presentation today.

From the beginning, the issues surrounding “partial-birth” abortion were political and legal. In June, 1995, a bill was introduced in Congress banning a procedure that its sponsors called “partial-birth” abortion. If the bill became law, it would be the first time since *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision which found in “the right to privacy” grounds for a giving a woman a Constitutional right to abortion, that any abortion procedure was declared illegal, and that doctors who used it would be

penalized. The bill passed but was vetoed in April of 1996, an election year, by President Bill Clinton. This was the first of several attempts to pass a bill outlawing “partial-birth” abortions, on both state and federal levels, which the Republican-controlled Houses of Congress succeeded in doing under President George W. Bush in October, 2003.

But given the brutal nature of the procedure, the issues surrounding “partial-birth” abortion were also ethical and medical. Some physicians testified that the procedure is unsafe and never necessary while others insisted that it is safe and always necessary to protect the life of a “distressed” mother or to terminate a “distressed” pregnancy. Complicating matters further, there were no reliable statistics on how often the procedure was performed, how early in the patients’ pregnancies and whether in fact it always performed on distressed mothers or distressed fetuses/babies. In short it was an important developing story with many dimensions.

But in terms of journalistic craft and ethics it was also a nightmare. Like “heart attack” and “female genital mutilation,” which are not medical terms but are better understood than their textbook definitions, so “partial-birth abortion” is a common sense term, widely used and better understood than “intact dilation and extraction.” But “partial-birth” is the term of choice for those opposed to “choice” in abortion. On the horns of this linguistic dilemma, The New York Times devised a cumbersome solution.

From the outset, the Times determined not to use “partial birth” in its news headlines. A computer search of the newspaper’s data base since June of 1995 shows how persistently this prohibition has been enforced. Only once, on a news story published in April 2004, has “partial birth” appeared in a headline. Otherwise, the Times has consistently employed a selection of opaque substitutes. Here is a representative sample of Times headlines, chosen for their variety of usages, published between 1995 and 2004:

HOUSE ACTS TO BAN ABORTION METHOD, MAKING IT A CRIME
 PRESIDENT VETOS MEASURE BANNING TYPE OF ABORTION.
 SAN FRANCISCO STIKES DOWN FEDERAL LAW BANNING FORM OF ABORTION
 BUSH SIGNS BAN ON A PROCEDURE FOR ABORTIONS

Anyone who has ever written a headline knows that a way could be found in most of these examples to use “partial-birth.” From my computer analysis I think it is obvious that the Times regards “partial-birth” as a toxic term. But why should this aversion result in headlines that, from a purely craft perspective, are so unclear? On this point, Mr. Siegal, the paper’s official in charge of style, was not much help. He does not, he said, “issue instructions on headlines.” But on the paper’s most frequently used term of choice, “type of abortion,” he had this to say: “In the example you cite I think ‘type of’ is an explicit and diligent disassociation of the narrow legislation [banning “partial-birth” abortions] from a ban on all abortions.” But surely “partial-birth,” which in every headline cited above is the procedure or type or form or method of abortion referred to, is even more explicit and diligent.

A more plausible explanation is this: every one of the Times’ headlines is designed to signal the reader that what is at stake in the “partial-birth” debate is not a specific procedure but the threat to abortion rights *tout court*. Thus, every story is framed as a narrative of assault on *Roe v. Wade*. This, I would argue, is the clear and obvious meaning of phrases like “type of” and the like.

This becomes obvious when we also examine certain formulas used in the stories the Times’ headlines introduced.

For example, in the story that appeared on November 2, 1995 under the headline, HOUSE ACTS TO BAN ABORTION METHOD, MAKING IT A CRIME, the reader is immediately told that a Congressional vote to ban “a particular method of abortion” was the first such action since *Roe v. Wade*. This is certainly true. In the second paragraph we are told that this particular method is “known medically as intact dilation and evacuation,” which, as we have seen, is false. Not until the fifth paragraph do we encounter the phrase “partial-birth” abortion and there it is defined as a term used only by “opponents of the method.”

By April of 1996, the Times had given up on defining the procedure in the first instance by using the “medical” terms. Otherwise it continued to treat “partial birth” abortion as a purely political issue. Here, in full, are the first four paragraphs of a major story the Times published on April 11 under the headline, PRESIDENT VETOS MEASURE BANNING TYPE OF ABORTION:

“Aligning himself firmly with abortion-rights advocates in an election year, President Clinton today vetoed a bill that would have outlawed *a certain type of late-term abortion*, saying the women who need the procedure to safeguard their own health “should not become pawns in a larger debate.”

Mr. Clinton vetoed the measure, then held an emotional White House ceremony at which he was flanked by five women who had undergone such abortions and who spoke tearfully about the disorders that threatened their lives and those of their fetuses and led to agonizing decisions.

The issue is likely to be a flash-point in the Presidential campaign, since *abortion opponents denounce the procedure*—performed only after 20 weeks of gestation—*as a gruesome “partial-birth” abortion* in which the fetus is partly extracted feet first and its brain then suctioned out to allow the head to pass through the birth canal. But abortion rights groups vehemently opposed the bill as the first Congressional ban on a particular abortion method since the Supreme Court legalized abortion in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.

At the White House ceremony, Mr. Clinton called the procedure a “potentially live-saving, certainly health-saving measures for “a small but extremely vulnerable group of women and families in this country, just a few hundred a year.” [Italics mine.]

Once again we find an opaque headline that refuses to name the type of abortion at issue. In fact it is given no name at all until the third paragraph. There, we learn, it is a procedure that “abortion opponents denounce as a “gruesome ‘partial-birth’ abortion....” But, as I have already pointed out, this statement, while true as far as it goes, is hardly accurate or fair, since by then there were large numbers of physicians and legislators who had declared themselves opposed to this particular form of abortion while remaining supportive of other abortion methods. But the Times chose to define the procedure as if the only issues at stake were political.

Not only is this story ideologically fashioned, it is erroneous in substance. In the months that followed, there were two investigative journalistic reports, neither by the Times, that refuted the claims made by Clinton--claims that were also aggressively put forward by abortion rights advocates and ones that, perhaps because they were congenial to its newsroom culture, the Times found no reason to question.

In September, 1996, the Bergen (NJ) Record found that in New Jersey alone approximately 1, 500 “partial-birth” abortions a year were performed—three times the number that abortion rights advocates had claimed for the entire country. Moreover, far from being “late term” abortions, as abortion-rights advocates and the Times had routinely identified them, and far from being on mostly on “disordered” mothers and fetuses, as Clinton claimed, the Record found that these abortions were performed mainly in the second trimester and mainly on healthy mothers and healthy fetuses.

Although the Washington Post is as strongly pro-choice as the Times, journalists there were also anxious to get at the facts of “partial-birth” abortion. A team led by David Brown, also a doctor, interview five abortionists in different areas of the country in an effort to figure out what percentage of these procedures involved women whose health was at risk, and what percentage involved fetuses/babies that would not survive if carried to full term. According Brown, “a large number, possibly even a majority of these procedures were done on normal fetuses (and) most of them were done before the period of viability.” Brown also found that “cases in which the mother’s life was at risk were extremely rare.”

From this reporting it was obvious that President Clinton and his White House staff had been badly misled by the abortion-rights advocates they had relied on. Ron Fitzsimmons, executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, announced that he had “lied” to the news media about the numbers of “partial birth” abortions, and at what point in patients’ pregnancies they were performed. On the contrary, Fitzsimmons said that the vast majority of these abortions are performed in the 20 months-plus range on healthy fetuses and healthy mothers. “The abortion rights folks know it, the anti-

abortion folks know it and so, probably does everyone else,” he said. On the following June 25, as noted above, the American Medical Association issued its letter in support of a government ban on the procedure—the first time the AMA had taken a position on abortion since *Roe v. Wade* and only the second time in 150 years that it had endorsed legislation to prohibit any medical procedure.

Despite these red flags, the Times continued to march to its own drummer. Since in its headlines the Times refused to name the abortion procedure it was reporting on, how did it define that procedure in the text? A computer analysis of the Times data base shows that between 1995 and the end of 2004, the newspaper published more than 200 news articles (excluding personal columns, letters to the editor, wire service reports and all stories under 200 words) in which “type of abortion” or “form of abortion” was immediately by phrases like “which opponents call “partial birth abortion.” This linguistic construction was so pervasive that it even appeared in stories dealing with the Vatican, television coverage of the Presidential debates and other pieces whose primary subjects were far removed from political and legal battles over “partial-birth” abortion. The language of evasion had become a verbal tic.

Obviously, consistency of this kind can only be achieved by following an editorial recipe. Siegal, a genial and accommodating man, briefly described the process that led the Times to adopt its formulas. “On ‘partial-birth’ abortion,” he said, “we have had many discussions among writers and editors who cover both the politics and the science. We all agree that there is no factually correct neutral term, so we are stuck with “partial birth,” but we try to qualify it with phrases like ‘known to opponents a partial birth abortion.’”

In other words, the discussion was entirely in-house. Siegal’s response reminded me of the observation by the newspaper’s Public Editor, Daniel Okrent, that “getting outside one’s own value system takes a great deal of questioning.” To be sure, in its longer news stories the Times has usually been diligent and fair in citing arguments from advocates on both sides of the “partial-birth” abortion debate. That’s what newspapers are supposed to do. And it is true that the Times is not alone in using the evasive formulations I’ve described. But it *is* alone in using them exclusively and consistently—indeed, one might say, dogmatically. This very standardization gives their entire coverage a mono-dimensional cast and conveys a single message to its readers: the only way to understand the issue of “partial-birth” abortion is to see it as a political threat to a woman’s right to an abortion of any kind and for any reason. And the corollary message is also clear: “partial-birth” is nothing more than a metaphor, or slogan, created by one party to the nation’s on-going debate over abortion itself. In short, “partial-birth” abortion is not to be regarded as a moral and medical issue in its own right.

As it happens, these have also been the consistent messages of the Times editorial board. Ironically, the editorial page is the one place over the last 12 years where readers were likely to see the term “Partial-Birth” used in a Times headline. For example, as far back as April, 11, 1998, in an editorial headlined, **THE POLITICS OF PARTIAL BIRTH ABORTION**, the Times declared: “The conservative campaign to ban partial birth abortions is part of a strategy to limit abortion rights in general.”

This has been the Times’ editorial position since the “partial-birth” abortion issue emerged in 1995. We see it again in **FRANK TALK ABOUT ABORTION**, a 1,302-word editorial published on September 30, 2003 that remains the longest and fullest expression of the newspaper’s point of view. The editorial, the only one on the page, is significant for the definitions it relies on: for example, it defines a human fetus as “a potential life,” implies that “intact dilation and extraction,” the definition put forward by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, means medical acceptance of the procedure, and ignores the much larger American Medical Association’s support for a Congressional ban on the very same procedure. The main purpose of the editorial, however, is to counter what it called “The ‘Partial Birth’ Strategy”:

“‘Partial birth’ is a political battle cry, not medical terminology. People who want to end all abortion rights have made no secret of the fact that their strategy is to single out the aspects that create the greatest popular discomfort, chipping away until, as a practical matter, access to legal abortion is no longer available.”

This, as I have shown, is precisely how the Times also frames—and ideologically sequesters--the issue of “partial-birth” abortion in its news stories. Moving from the news pages to the editorial page it is hard to know which is the sound, which the echo. One of the values that newspapers are expected to uphold is the absolute separation between the editorial page and the news pages. At the Times, this independence of news from editorial is symbolized by housing editorial writers on one floor, reporters on another. Yet on the issue of “partial-birth” abortion, those who edit the news and those who comment on it appear to be joined at the hip.

This conclusion should not surprise long-time readers of the New York Times. Nor am I under any illusion that the Times will, in the upcoming Supreme Court deliberations on this subject, rethink its one-dimensional newsroom practices--much less examine its constraining newsroom culture. Indeed, just last June, in a speech at her alma mater, Yale University, the Times’ lone and longtime Supreme Court reporter, Linda Greenhouse, decried the democratic efforts to reverse *Roe v. Wade*. The Times response? The new Public Editor lauded her for keeping her personal opinions out of her reporting. But he said nothing about the ideological spin of the paper’s newsroom culture.

A walk through the Times, as the former Public Editor put it, can indeed make readers feel like “you are traveling in a strange and forbidding world.” It is a strange world where “women” carry “fetuses” but where it is forbidden to ever write that “mothers” carry “babies.”

As I said at the outset, this presentation is about journalistic ethics, not the ethics of abortion. My purpose throughout has been to demonstrate that even at the highest levels of journalism, the demands of craft and the demands of ethics are braided and seldom separable. Language is where the two most often intertwine, and when ideology determines what is written as news, language and its integrity are the first to suffer.

ENDS
